

On Monday, January 17, 2022, service members of the South Cumberland Plateau (SCP) AmeriCorps VISTA Project gathered virtually with their local community to engage in a program honoring the work of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The program, organized by the South Cumberland Plateau AmeriCorps VISTA Project, allowed residents and VISTA service members the opportunity to deep-dive into local historical events and reflect on racial relations in the region. Featured speakers included Dr. Camille Westmont, director of the Lone Rock Stockade Project, and Woody Register, director of The Roberson Project on Slavery, Race, and Reconciliation at Sewanee: The University of the South. The University houses the SCP VISTA Project in its Office of Civic Engagement.

A broad cross-section of individuals, split almost evenly across Plateau residents, nearby campus staff, and VISTA service members, participated in the day's events. "The composition of this group was indicative of the kinds of gathering spaces our program strives to make available," reflects SCP VISTA Project Coordinator Stephanie Colchado Kelley, who helped to organize speakers and agenda, "Our community is diverse and varied. People are remarkable in their willingness to seek out understanding and pull together when there's opportunity to advance the common good."

Dr. Westmont's discussion centered around her archeological research on convict leasing systems in Tennessee, including a site owned by the Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railroad Company located on the Plateau. Westmont presented statistics about the demographic makeup of prisoners in the stockade and recounted journal entries that outlined prison conditions and everyday life. Westmont also highlighted an event in which local residents rebelled against the stockade, setting the primary prison complex on fire in a demonstration of resistance to the Company.

Register's presentation highlighted historical race relations at the University of the South, including a look at the University's relationships to the Company and a deep-dive into the life of Willie Sims, a local African-American man commonly nicknamed "Willie Six." During this talk, Register underscored the lack of archived information about the personal life and accomplishments of people of color employed at the University, contrasting this with the many records available about Caucasian employees. At the closing of his talk, Register reminded the group of the power that the news, media, and other recordkeepers wield.

Between presentations, the group engaged in a showing of the PBS documentary, "Slavery By Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II," based on the book by Douglas A. Blackmon, which speaks broadly about convict leasing systems in the United States.

After the morning program, the group transitioned into an afternoon of service. VISTA members worked alongside residents to transcribe historical records, capturing information on individuals held in the stockade. Among the details transcribed were prisoner names, race, crimes, sentences, and other handwritten jailer notes, such as cause of death and escape attempts. According to Dr. Westmont's count, the group transcribed over 203 lines of record.

There is still the opportunity to participate for those who were unable to make the program. The volunteer transcription process is virtually and asynchronous, making it easy to become involved wherever you are located.

How to Volunteer in Stockade Transcription Efforts:

1. Navigate to www.fromthepage.com
2. Create an account (if you don't already have one)
3. Go to "Find A Project"
4. Search for "Stockade"
5. Click on the stockade site you would like to transcribe from
6. Hit "Start Transcribing"
7. Fill in information from the scanned transcription in the white excel-like boxes provided. You can use the arrows in the upper right-hand portion of the screen to navigate to different pages of the document.
8. Hit "Done" when you are finished transcribing a page.

General Notes on Transcriptions:

- * If you see a blue banner at the top of the page saying something like "someone is already transcribing this", please back out & try again (we don't want two people transcribing at the same time)
- * A crossed-out name means that the person left the stockade (transferred, died, released, etc). We still want to transcribe any information that is crossed out.
- * Type exactly what is written (including punctuation), not what you think might be written.
- * It is OK to put a question mark (?) in place of a letter or symbol that you cannot read
- * After you have done a transcription, please hit "done" after you have completed the entire page (if you aren't quite done, you can hit "save")
- * You may also be asked to review saved transcription information from another volunteer.

If you need additional assistance, contact vista@sewanee.edu.

Learn More About the Groups Involved in this Program (alphabetical order):

Black at Sewanee: blacksewanee.org

Lone Rock Stockade Project: facebook.com/convictstockadeproject/

The Roberson Project: new.sewanee.edu/roberston-project/

South Cumberland Plateau AmeriCorps VISTA Project:

new.sewanee.edu/campus-life/engaging/civic-engagement-internships/ameri-corps-vista/

South Cumberland Community Fund: southcumberlandcommunityfund.org

University of the South - Office of Civic Engagement: new.sewanee.edu/campus-life/engaging/

Further Suggested Resources (in alphabetical order), for those who wish to explore this topic on their own:

13th – Ava DuVernay (film, available on Netflix)

All About Love: New Visions (Love Song to the Nation) – bell hooks

Chained in Silence: Black Women and Convict Labor in the New South – Talitha L Leflouria

Healing Resistance: A Radically Different Response to Harm – Kazu Haga

Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption - Bryan Stevenson (both a book and film)

Strength to Love – Martin Luther King, Jr. (a collection of homilies)

The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness – Michelle Alexander

"Worse than Slavery": Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice – David M. Oshinsky